

THIS MONTH

The MacBook Air (right) might be a superb feat of design, but we think Apple could have packed more in. Acer's Ferrari 1100 (page 24), for example, costs a little more, but has the convenience of a built-in optical drive, three USB2 ports, a standard VGA output and a removable battery.

Nikon's D60 (page 43) is yet another entry-level digital SLR that could tempt you to upgrade from a super-zoom compact camera. It's similar to the D40X, with a 10-megapixel sensor and 2½in screen, but comes with a better lens and some significant technical improvements which lead to excellent photos.

We were also impressed by Gigabyte's new motherboard (page 56), which costs £64, yet has on-board graphics that can handle Blu-ray movie playback. You could pair this with a Pioneer BDR-202 Blu-ray drive (page 53), which costs £203.

There's lots of great free software to download and, starting this month, we'll be picking three of the best applications. You'll find them on page 62.

Jim Martin
Deputy Editor

jim@computershopper.co.uk



APPLE

MacBook Air

★★★

£1,199 inc VAT

From www.apple.com/uk/thestore

Manufacturers often have to sacrifice features, such as a spacious keyboard and screen, to make an ultra-portable laptop weigh significantly less than 2kg. Apple's MacBook Air has a comfortable keyboard and a 13.3in widescreen display, yet weighs only 1.4kg.

We were dazzled by the brightness of the screen. The 1,280x800-pixel resolution is spacious for a lightweight laptop and provides plenty of space in which to work. The glossy finish reflects light from overhead sources such as fluorescent office lighting, but the resulting glare isn't as distracting as other glossy screens we've seen.

The keyboard is responsive and comfortable to use, and the keys automatically illuminate depending on the darkness of your surroundings. The touch pad is accurate, but its large size means the single button is very wide but not deep enough to use comfortably. The touch pad, like the iPhone and the iPod touch, can recognise gestures. For example, you can rotate or zoom in and out of photos using simple finger swipes. This works smoothly, but currently only in a handful of Mac OS X applications such as Safari and iPhoto.

The power supply's magnetic connector disconnects harmlessly if you trip over it, instead of dragging the laptop to the floor.

As well as being very light, the MacBook Air is also strikingly thin. Even at its thickest point – which is only 19mm – it's not much bulkier than a DVD case. Despite its slenderness, the aluminium case feels sturdy and rigid with almost no flexing.

Unfortunately, several components have been jettisoned to achieve this slenderness. There's no DVD writer, FireWire socket, Ethernet port or memory card reader. There's

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Apple MacBook Air	★★★	Canon PIXMA MP520	★★★★
Cube247 Serpens ST6	★★★★	Epson Perfection V200 Photo	★★★★
Cube247 Sigma ST13	★★★	Fujitsu ScanSnap S300	★★★★
Dell XPS 420	★★★	HP Color Laserjet 3600	★★★★
Fujitsu Siemens Amilo Si 2636	★★★	Lexmark Z1320	★★★★
MESH C92 Pulse Pro	★★★★	Ricoh Aficio GX2500	★★
PC Nextday Zoostorm Core 2 Quad Q6600		Samsung ML-2510	★★★★
Advanced Premium PC	★★★★	TallyGenicom 8108N Colour Laser Printer	★★★★
Samsung R70	★★★★	Xerox Phaser 6125N	★★
Handhelds		Displays	
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Apple iPhone	★★★★	Epson EMP-TWD10	★★
Archos 405	★★★★	LG 37LC55	★★★★
Magellan Maestro 4245	★★★★	LG Flatron L204WS	★★★★
Palm Centro	★★★★	LG Flatron L227WT	★★★★
Palm Treo 500v	★★★★	Mirai DTL-832E600	★★★★
TomTom Go 720	★★★★	Optoma EP727	★★★★
		Panasonic PT-AX200E	★★★★
		ViewSonic VX2435wm	★★★★
Photography		Video	
page 42		page 46	
Canon EOS 400D	★★★★	BT Vision Self Install	★★
Canon PowerShot A590 IS	★★★★	Canon HV20	★★★★
Canon PowerShot A720 IS	★★★★	Terratec Cinergy DT USB XS Diversity	★★★★
Fujifilm FinePix F480	★★	Topfield TF5810PVRt	★★
Nikon D60	★★★★	Toshiba Camileo Pro	★★
Panasonic Lumix DMC-FZ18	★★★★		
Pentax Optio A30	★★★★		
Pentax Optio A40	★★★★		
Samsung NV8	★★★★		



PC SYSTEMS & LAPTOPS

no built-in mobile broadband modem either, or a CardBus or ExpressCard slot to accommodate one. The single USB2 port, headphone socket and monitor connector are the only ports present and are tucked away in a hard-to-reach, flip-down drawer. The lone USB2 port is a limitation if you need to connect multiple peripherals.

The thin chassis also limits the Air to a low-capacity 1.8in 80GB 4,200rpm hard disk, similar to those found in the iPod Classic. It's fine for storing Office documents but isn't ideal for those with large music libraries, or if you want to install Windows alongside Mac OS X. If you need an optical drive, Apple's USB DVD writer is sold separately for £65, although you may not need it thanks to a clever software substitute (see FAQ, right, for more).

Unsurprisingly, the Air's low-voltage Core 2 Duo processor isn't

powerful enough for demanding video- and photo-editing work, but it's fast enough for internet browsing, email and office applications. The maximum 2GB of RAM is already fitted. This will be fine for most uses, but may not be enough if you want to run MacOS and

Windows simultaneously using virtualisation software. The Air lasted a respectable three hours and 45 minutes in our light-use battery test, but we expected longer from a laptop using a low-voltage processor.

The MacBook Air is undoubtedly a desirable laptop, but the compromises limit its usefulness for all but the most undemanding users. Unless you must have Mac OS, the Toshiba R500 (reviewed on page 102) is 400g lighter, £100 cheaper and has a built-in DVD writer and far longer battery life at five hours and six minutes.

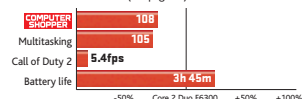
Alan Lu

SUMMARY

- ✓ Slim yet sturdy
- ✓ Comfortable keyboard; bright screen
- ✗ Single USB2 port; no optical drive

ULTRA-PORTABLE LAPTOP 1.6GHz Intel Core 2 Duo L7500, 2GB RAM, 80GB disk, Intel GMA X3100 graphics, 13.3in widescreen LCD, Mac OS X, one-year return-to-base warranty, 1.4kg
PART CODE MB003B/A
DETAILS www.apple.com/uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 66)



FAQ

Q How can I access CDs and DVDs on my MacBook Air?

A The Air can use the optical drive of another Mac or Windows PC on your network, once you've installed a utility that's included on the Air's restore disc.

It worked surprisingly well in our tests. We installed Microsoft Office 2008 using the optical drive of a Windows laptop connected to a Draft-N wireless network in just 12 minutes. Using a dedicated optical drive took nine minutes and 30 seconds.

This application isn't a complete substitute for a USB DVD writer, though. Although it can be used to reinstall Mac OS, the utility doesn't recognise Windows installation discs, music CDs or DVD movies. It can't be used to burn CDs or DVDs, either.

This feature isn't yet available for other Macs, where it might be a useful substitute for a broken optical drive.

Alan Lu
PC systems and storage expert



alan@computershopper.co.uk



Audio page 48

Apple iPod Nano	★★★★★
Auzentech Auzen X-Fi Prelude 7.1	★★★★★
Gear4 BassStation	★★★★★
iRhythms A-211	★★★★★
M-Audio Fast Track Pro	★★★★★
Olympus LS-10	★★★★★
Philips SHE2550	★★★★★
Sandisk Sansa e280	★★★★★
Shure SE210	★★★★★

Networks page 50

Buffalo WBRM-G125	★★★★★
EnGenius ESR- 9710 Wireless-N Gigabit Router	★★★★★
Linksys WAG325	★★★★★
SMC 7904WBRA-N	★★★★★
Solwise NET-PL-200AV-PIGGY	★★★★★

Storage page 52

Corsair Flash Voyager 4GB	★★★★★
Emprex P2P Download Engine	★★★★★
Hitachi Deskstar 7K1000 HDS721075KLA330	★★★★★
LG GGW-H20L	★★★★★
LG GSA-E50N	★★★★★
Pioneer BDR-202	★★★★★
RaidSonic iBox 1B-361StUS-B-BL	★★★★★
SanDisk Cruzer Contour 8GB	★★★★★
Toshiba MK3252GSX	★★★★★
Western Digital Caviar SE16 500GB	★★★★★
Western Digital Scorpio 250GB	★★★★★
Western Digital Scorpio 320GB WD3200BEVT	★★★★★

Components page 56

Cooler Master Cosmos S	★★★★★
Cooler Master Hyper TX 2	★★★★★
Gigabyte GA-MA78GM-S2H	★★★★★
Gigabyte GeForce 8800 GT	★★★★★
MSI N9600GT T2D512-OC	★★★★★

Software & Games page 58

Adobe Creative Suite 3 Design Premium	★★★★★
Assassin's Creed: Director's Cut Edition	★★★★★
Asterix at the Olympic Games	★★★★★
Avanquest Driver Genius 2007 Professional	★★★★★
Babylon 7	★★★★★
CPU-Z	★★★★★
CyberLink DVD Suite Ultra 6	★★★★★
Free Download Manager	★★★★★
Frontlines: Fuel of War	★★★★★
Gears of War	★★★★★
GetData Recover My Files	★★★★★
Iolo System Mechanic	★★★★★
IrfanView	★★★★★
Kaspersky Internet Security 7.0	★★★★★
MYOB Accounting	★★★★★
OpenOffice OpenOffice.org 2.1	★★★★★
Roxio Easy Media Creator Suite 10	★★★★★
RS Audials Radiotracker 4.0 Premium	★★★★★
Sage Instant Accounts 14	★★★★★

BYTE SIZE

GENIUS Ergo 555 Laser

★★★★

£24 inc VAT
From www.lambda-tek.com/componentshop

Genius' latest gaming mouse claims to be the first in the world to have an OLED display. It sits between the two main buttons, below the scroll wheel, and shows the currently selected profile and the dpi settings. While idle, it shows an unintelligible animation.

The profiling software is badly designed and often throws up incomprehensible error messages. No manual is included to explain how to use the software, but you can reassign the additional six buttons to any keyboard key.

The mouse is light and glides easily, and the 3,200dpi setting was valuable in first-person shooters. The woven cable also ensured no tangles.

The Ergo 555 is well built and comfortable to use, but be aware of its poor software.

Jim Martin

DETAILS www.geniusnet.com

MICROSOFT Sidewinder Mouse

★★★★

£28 inc VAT
From www.eclipsecomputers.com

Microsoft's latest gaming mouse has a display like the Ergo 555 (above). It, too, shows the dpi settings, which can be changed easily during a game. Four weights (one 5g and three 10g) are included and you can install up to three at once in a sliding tray. Three types of push-in feet change resistance as you move the mouse on a surface, all of which are stored in a handy box.

The Sidewinder is sturdily built, but all but the largest of hands will find it too big and uncomfortable. The two side-mounted thumb buttons are well placed, and the software is much better designed than Genius'. If you have huge hands, it's a good choice, but otherwise, it's one to avoid.

Jim Martin

DETAILS www.microsoft.com

ACER Ferrari 1100

★★★★

£1,399 inc VAT
From www.simplyacer.com

Acer's 12.1in Ferrari 1100 is essentially an upgrade to the Ferrari 1000 (reviewed in *What's New, Shopper* 226). It comes with one of AMD's latest Turion 64 X2 processors and is the first laptop we've seen to include 4GB of RAM and the 64-bit version of Windows Vista Ultimate edition.

Opening the lid reveals more subtle styling than the previous model. The small keyboard is comfortable to use and the touchpad is spacious. Below it on the front edge are two switches for Bluetooth and WiFi. Above the keyboard on the right-hand side are touch-sensitive shortcut keys, which are lit by blue LEDs. They're customisable, but are set to launch Outlook, Internet Explorer and the Ferrari World website.

The 250GB hard disk is spacious and there's also a slot-loading DVD drive, a media card reader, Bluetooth 2.0, three USB2 ports, FireWire and a handy fingerprint reader. Other useful features include VGA and S-video ports and a Bluetooth VOIP phone, which can be stored (and recharged) in the ExpressCard/54 slot. The glossy 12.1in screen has a resolution of 1,280x800 and was bright and sharp in our tests.

In our benchmarks, the Turion 64 X2 TL-66 processor scored 185 overall. This is by no means an outstanding score, but battery life is a bigger priority for anyone choosing an ultra-portable laptop. The 1100 lasted for four hours and nine minutes in our light-use test, which is an average result.

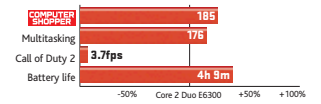
Like many other laptops, the 1100 has Dolby Virtual Surround; the effect was surprisingly good when watching DVDs. Above the screen is an integrated webcam.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Stylish; integrated optical drive
- ✓ Fingerprint scanner; slip case
- ✗ Expensive; not particularly light

ULTRA-PORTABLE LAPTOP 2.3GHz AMD Turion 64 X2 TL-66, 4GB RAM, 250GB disk, ATI Mobility Radeon X1270 graphics, DVD+/-RW +/-DL DVD-RAM, 12.1in widescreen LCD, one-year return-to-base warranty, 2kg
PART CODE LX.FR90U.070
DETAILS www.acer.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 66)



The ATI Mobility Radeon X1270 graphics card isn't powerful enough for even older games. In our Call of Duty 2 test it scored 3.7fps. Lowering the resolution to 800x600 and turning off anti-aliasing and anisotropic filtering only boosted this to a dismal 6.9fps.

Build quality is very good, and the screen is protected by a carbon fibre lid. At this price, though, the one-year warranty is far too stingy. In fact, we found little to justify the steep price. The Bluetooth mouse and VOIP phone don't add much value, and neither does the printed user manual, even if it was one of the most helpful we've seen. The luxury packaging might make you feel you've spent your

money well, but there's no hiding the fact that you're paying a premium for the Ferrari name.

If the whole case was made from carbon fibre we might like the Ferrari 1100 more, but the 2kg weight isn't particularly light. We can't see many users benefiting from Vista Ultimate 64-bit, either, and few will need 4GB of RAM – both are unnecessary expenses. Those looking for an ultra-portable laptop should see our Labs test on page 102. If you're a huge Ferrari fan and have cash to spare the 1100 won't disappoint, but for everyone else it's poor value.

Mark Forbes

Also consider...

SAMSUNG R70

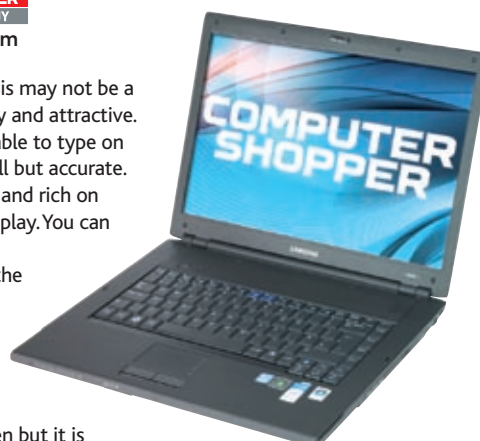
★★★★★

£660 inc VAT
From www.cclonline.com

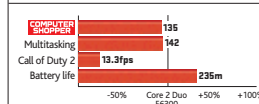
The Samsung R70's chassis may not be a new design, but it's sturdy and attractive. The keyboard is comfortable to type on and the touch pad is small but accurate.

Colours looked bright and rich on the 15.4in widescreen display. You can connect the R70 to a high-definition TV using the HDMI port, and there's plenty of room for your files on the spacious 200GB hard disk.

The R70 isn't the quickest laptop we've seen but it is fast enough for most tasks and it has a generous 2GB of RAM for dealing with memory-intensive tasks such as photo manipulation. The graphics chip isn't powerful enough to play the latest games, but it



GENERAL-PURPOSE NOTEBOOK
Intel Core 2 Duo T5450, 2GB RAM, 200GB disk, Nvidia GeForce 8400M GS graphics, DVD+/-RW +/-DL, 15.4in widescreen LCD, 2.6kg
PART CODE NP-R70A007/SUK
DETAILS www.samsung.com/uk
FULL REVIEW Mar 2008



doesn't share system memory like integrated graphics chips. It lasted nearly four hours in our battery test, and is excellent value at this price.

FUJITSU SIEMENS Amilo Si 2636

★★★★

£699 inc VAT

From www.fujitsu-siemens-shop.co.uk

The Fujitsu Siemens Amilo Si 2636 is a 13.3in laptop and is aimed at home and family users. It's the first laptop we've seen to use Intel's new Turbo Memory, which supplements the computer's main memory to make applications load faster in Windows Vista and improve boot times.

The 2636 has one of the latest Core 2 Duo processors, a 2.1GHz T8100. This is the least powerful of the new range, although it still managed a rapid 179 overall in our benchmarks. There's 2GB of RAM and 1GB of Turbo Memory. As we couldn't disable the latter, it's hard to say how much extra performance it offers, but the Amilo booted into Vista in well under 30 seconds. The 250GB hard disk should be enough for most uses.

The Amilo's red and black case makes it look like Acer's Ferrari 1100 (reviewed on page 24), and is a welcome departure from the usual black and silver colour schemes. Build quality isn't as good as we'd have liked. The keyboard is comfortable to type on, but the circular touchpad is awkward to use and the buttons are stiff.

Network connectivity is good: there's both Gigabit Ethernet and Draft-N wireless networking. We like the HDMI port, but with no VGA or DVI interfaces you'll need an HDMI-to-DVI adaptor to connect to most monitors. It's good to see a combined eSATA and USB2 port, making a total of four USB2 ports. There's also a memory card reader, Bluetooth 2.0, a webcam and a useful, good-quality slip case.

The 13.3in widescreen LCD isn't particularly bright and the glossy coating means it's difficult to use



outdoors because of reflections. Viewing angles aren't great, either, and colours look right only if you're looking head-on at the screen.

Our Call of Duty 2 test ran at 5.6fps at the screen's 1,280x800 native resolution. This was no surprise as the Intel X3100 graphics processor isn't powerful enough for modern games. We lowered the settings to 800x600 and turned off anti-aliasing, but this led to an increase of only 3fps.

Like Acer's Ferrari, the Amilo has a slot-loading DVD writer. This looks stylish, but precludes the use of 8cm CDs or DVDs, which are often used for drivers.

Fujitsu Siemens has tried to create a highly portable laptop with the Amilo Si 2636, but it has three major drawbacks. First, the battery lasted for just under three hours in our light-use test, so you can't work away from mains power for long. Second, its 2.3kg weight is heavier than we'd like for a 13.3in laptop; and third, the touchpad is too awkward to use.

If portability is important to you, Acer's Aspire 2920 (reviewed in *Labs*, page 102) lasted for four hours and 17 minutes in our tests. It has a slightly smaller 12.1in screen, but weighs less and is nearly £100 cheaper.

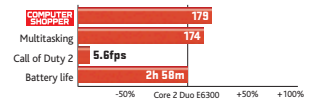
Mark Forbes

SUMMARY

- ✓ Good performance
- ✓ Bundled slip case
- ✗ Awkward touchpad

GENERAL-PURPOSE LAPTOP 2.1GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T8100, 2GB RAM, 250GB hard disk, Intel GMA X3100 graphics, DVD+/-RW +/-DL DVD-RAM, 13.3in widescreen LCD, one-year collect-and-return warranty, 2.3kg
PART CODE CCN: GBR-110120-001
DETAILS www.fujitsu-siemens.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 66)



BYTE SIZE

HAUPPAUGE WinTV-CI Setanta Sports Kit

★★★★

£94 inc VAT

From www.morecomputers.co.uk

This kit includes all you need to watch Setanta Sports on your laptop or PC, bar a compatible DVB-T tuner. A list of tuners can be found at www.hauppauge.co.uk.

Setanta covers football, rugby, boxing, golf and motorsport. Football matches include 46 Premier League games each season.

The WinTV-CI box attaches to a USB2 port and the Setanta CAM module plugs into it. The SmartCard slots into the CAM.

Reception was best when using a twin-tuner USB device such as the HVR-900, as it can combine the two signals. Hauppauge is about to release a plugin for Media Center, but £94 (plus £10 per month) is a lot of money for the privilege of watching one extra channel.

Jim Martin

DETAILS www.hauppauge.co.uk

BYE BYE STANDBY Motion Sensor

★★★★

£15 inc VAT

From <http://shop.byebye-standby.com>

This motion sensor is designed to turn on a single device plugged into a Bye Bye Standby module when movement is detected, and turn it off after a set amount of time. You can choose the amount of time between four seconds and five minutes.

The sensor works well, but seems pointless. It can't be used outside, and it doesn't make much sense to have a lamp, TV or PC controlled by movement. If you want a motion-controlled light, X10 or standard PIR devices are a better choice.

David Ludlow

DETAILS www.byebye-standby.com

Also consider...

MESH G92 Pulse Pro

★★★★★

£820 inc VAT

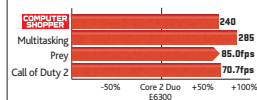
From www.meshcomputers.comCOMPUTER
SHOPPER
BEST BUY

The G92 Pulse Pro is a well-specified PC at a great price. Its 512MB Nvidia GeForce 8800GT graphics card performed very well in our demanding 3D tests. The G92 should be able to play the latest games at high detail settings, including upcoming DirectX 10 titles, for some time to come. The G92 can also be used for more serious work thanks to its fast Core 2 Duo processor and 2GB of RAM. Despite its power, it's a surprisingly quiet computer.

Mesh has substituted the original 22in GNR monitor for a 22in HannsG HI221DP. This is identical except for its higher 1,000:1 contrast ratio.



DESKTOP PC 3GHz Intel Core 2 Duo E6850, 2GB RAM, 500GB hard disk, 512MB Nvidia GeForce 8800GT, DVD+/-RW +/-DL, 22in widescreen LCD
DETAILS www.meshcomputers.com
FULL REVIEW Mar 2008



A second Nvidia graphics card can be added in SLI mode to boost 3D performance even further. Usefully, the 8800GT graphics card is a single slot rather than a double slot card, so it doesn't block off any adjacent PCI slots.

CUBE247 Sigma ST13

★★★★

£1,299 inc VAT
From Cube247 0870 2421179

Cube247's Sigma ST13 is the first PC we've seen to come equipped with a staggering 8GB of RAM. The Sigma is an impressively specified PC, but it may be overkill for most people's needs.

As well as its memory, the Sigma also has a quad-core processor – Intel's Core 2 Quad Q6600. This sped through our benchmarks, but the extra memory didn't make the Sigma dramatically faster than the other quad-core PCs reviewed here. You'll see a performance boost from the extra RAM only if you regularly perform memory-intensive tasks such as editing RAW image files, high-definition video or composing music – not gaming, which is the primary purpose of this PC.

To take advantage of the RAM, the Sigma comes pre-installed with 64-bit Vista Home Premium. Not all peripherals have 64-bit drivers, though, so double-check before buying.

Cube247 has equipped the Sigma with two 1GB Nvidia GeForce 8800GT graphics cards configured in SLI mode. It achieved



some of the fastest results we've seen in our 3D graphics tests. It should be able to play the most graphically detailed games easily.

Unfortunately, the graphics cards are noisy. They also block off the empty expansion card slots, so you'll have to rely on USB peripherals.

The 22in widescreen display is bright but the backlight was uneven and there was some graininess. The HDMI input means you'll need a HDMI-to-DVI adaptor if you want to avoid using the VGA interface and get the best image quality.

We can't fault the Sigma for gaming performance, but we can't help but feel that it commands an unnecessary premium for extra RAM and an operating system that gamers don't need. It's also noisy and comes with only a single year of warranty.

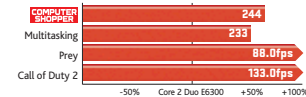
Alan Lu

SUMMARY

- ✓ Fast 3D performance
- ✗ Noisy; blocked expansion slots
- ✗ Expensive

DESKTOP PC 2.4GHz Intel Core 2 Quad Q6600, 8GB RAM, 2x 500GB hard disk, 2x 1GB 8800GT, DVD+/-RW +/-DL, DVD-ROM, 22in widescreen LCD, Windows Vista Home Premium 64-bit, one-year collect-and-return warranty. Power consumption 8W standby, 176W idle, 210W active
PART CODE Sigma ST13
DETAILS www.cube247.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 66)



DELL XPS 420

★★★★

£1,099 inc VAT
From Dell 0844 444 5818

Dell may have a reputation for low-priced office computers, but the XPS 420 shows it can make powerful gaming PCs, too. Like the other desktop PCs reviewed this month, the XPS has a quad-core Intel Core 2 Quad Q6600 processor. Our benchmarks proved no match for its power, especially our video-encoding test, so it won't keep you waiting around.

The XPS should have no trouble playing demanding games thanks to the GeForce 8800GTX graphics card, which excelled in our 3D tests.

Despite its superb performance, however, the XPS is one of the quietest gaming PCs we've heard.

You can watch and record either analogue or Freeview TV broadcasts using the PCI TV tuner, but oddly there's no remote control. There's little space for upgrades, so if you want a second tuner, you'll have to add a USB or PCI Express x1 model or free up a PCI slot by removing the modem.

The two 500GB hard disks are configured as a RAID 0 array by default, although it can be reset as a RAID 1 array, too. There aren't any empty 3½in drive bays for adding more hard disks, though.



The XPS doesn't come with a monitor, but some

interesting extra features are included. You can easily import video from sources such as a VCR using the S-video and composite video inputs. A Windows Sideshow display shows information such as unread emails or upcoming appointments which could be useful when playing games, but its fixed position above the DVD writer makes it difficult to see. The X-Fi sound card is a more useful extra – its EAX processing can produce more realistic audio in games that support it.

The quiet and well-specified XPS 420 is fast in games and Windows applications, but it's expensive.

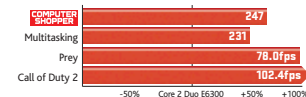
Alan Lu

SUMMARY

- ✓ Fast
- ✓ Quiet
- ✗ Expensive; no monitor included

DESKTOP PC 2.4GHz Intel Core 2 Quad Q6600, 2GB RAM, 2x 500GB hard disk, 768MB Nvidia GeForce 8800GTX, DVD+/-RW +/-DL, Windows Vista Home Premium one-year on-site warranty. Power consumption 10W standby, 167W idle, 206W active
PART CODE NPUK5 - DRX402
DETAILS www.dell.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 66)



BYTE SIZE

DREAM CHEEKY MSN Missile Launcher

★★★★

£50 inc VAT
From www.firebox.com



Dream Cheeky's MSN Missile Launcher is an ideal toy for anyone who wants to rain down destruction (in the form of small foam projectiles) upon their friends and colleagues. This version has a built-in webcam, and there's also an MSN applet so it can be fired remotely.

The launcher sounds truly menacing as it rotates on its base, and the software lets out an ominous klaxon sound as it prepares to fire. Unfortunately, the missiles are small and have a range of only a metre and a half. This curbed our world domination plans, but we still enjoyed playing with it.

Kat Orphanides

DETAILS www.dreamcheeky.com

HERCULES Dualpix Chat and Show

★★★★

£53 inc VAT
From www.amazon.co.uk



Hercules's Dualpix Chat and Show webcam is more expensive than most, but its high-resolution 1.3-megapixel sensor means its image quality is above the usual standard. Video clips at the highest resolution of 1,280x960 were a bit jerky, but we were generally pleased with the image and video quality.

This small camera can sit securely on an LCD monitor or balanced on your desk. It comes with its own software interface so you can record video and take low-resolution photos of yourself looking enigmatic to put on your Facebook profile. It's ideal for use with Windows Live! Messenger and for making video blogs, but you won't benefit from the extra resolution for web applications. It's a good webcam but there are better alternatives for less.

Kat Orphanides

DETAILS www.hercules.com

BYTE SIZE

SAITEK Cyborg Rumble

★★★★★

£18 inc VAT
From www.play.com


This joystick lets you reverse the positions of the directional pad and left-hand analogue joystick. It's possible thanks to an ingenious pop-out module that can be easily switched around. This means it can mimic both the Xbox 360's and PlayStation 3's controllers.

The FPS button maps your mouse control to the right analogue stick. You can then play any FPS game using the Cyborg, even if the game itself doesn't support it. However, PC-based shooters often lack the subtle auto-aim assistance of console shooters, so precise targeting can be tricky. Software is also provided to map keyboard controls to any button on the joystick.

The Cyborg Rumble is a well-designed joystick at a good price, but Microsoft's Xbox 360 Controller for Windows is a better choice due to its highly responsive analogue joysticks and triggers.

Seth Barton

DETAILS www.saitek.com

GEAR4 iVak Case for iPod Nano

★★★★★

£23 inc VAT
From www.advancedmp3players.co.uk


Gear4's latest iVak case fits Apple's third-generation iPod Nano MP3 players. It feels sturdy thanks to its hard plastic construction, yet it has a soft, velvety texture.

The iVak doesn't add much bulk to your Nano and clips securely together. The iPod's screen is protected by a transparent plastic cover but the click wheel, headphone jack and dock connector are all still accessible.

The iVak looks stylish and is sturdy enough to protect your Nano. It's a little expensive, but it's one of the better-designed iPod cases we've seen.

Alan Lu

DETAILS www.gear4.com

PC NEXTDAY

Zoostorm Core 2 Quad Q6600 Advanced Premium PC

★★★★★

£504 inc VAT
From www.pcnextday.co.uk

Technologies that once seemed prohibitively expensive often drop quickly in price. Quad-core processors are no different. PC Nextday's latest quad-core PC costs a mere £504. Whether the compromises made to accommodate its powerful processor are the right ones depend on your computing needs.

The PC has an Intel Core 2 Quad Q6600 processor and 2GB of RAM. It sped through our benchmarks with a particularly high score of 439 in our video-encoding test. However, the Zoostorm is remarkably quiet.

One compromise made to accommodate the Q6600 is the use of an integrated graphics processor. If you want to play 3D games or connect a second monitor for extra desktop space, you'll have to buy a dedicated PCI Express graphics card.

Another compromise is the basic 19in Cibox monitor, although it is a widescreen model and is



fairly bright. There was a slight blueish cast to whites and images looked a bit grainy, but it's otherwise adequate for everyday use. The weedy-sounding stereo speakers won't do justice to your music, though.

If the 250GB hard disk isn't spacious enough, the Zoostorm can accommodate another two internal SATA disks. There's also space for adding another optical drive. The two empty PCI slots and the PCI Express x1 slot can be used to add peripherals such as a TV tuner or sound card, although if you plan lots of upgrades then you may need to replace the 350W power supply.

There are a lot of compromises for a quad-core processor that won't provide much – if any – benefit in most of today's applications. If you're desperate to get a quad-core chip the Zoostorm is good value, but it's certainly not a well-rounded package.

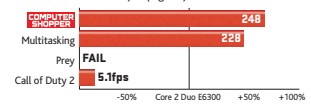
Alan Lu

SUMMARY

- ✓ Inexpensive for a quad-core processor
- ✓ Fast in Windows
- ✗ Poor monitor; integrated graphics

DESKTOP PC 2.4GHz Intel Core 2 Quad Q6600, 2GB RAM, 250GB hard disk, Intel GMA 3100, DVD+/-RW +/-DL DVD-RAM, 19in widescreen LCD, Windows Vista Home Premium, one-year collect-and-return warranty. Power consumption 8W standby, 70W idle, 80W active
PART CODE 3364-2354
DETAILS www.pcnextday.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 66)



CUBE247 Serpens ST6

★★★★★

£949 inc VAT
From Cube247 0870 2421179

Cube 247's Serpens ST6 is very similar to the Sigma ST13 reviewed on page 29. It shares the same peripherals and Intel quad-core processor, but it has many of the Sigma's caveats.

Although the Serpens doesn't have as much RAM as the Sigma, 4GB is still twice as much as many other PCs at this price. The pre-installed 64-bit Vista Home Premium is necessary to take advantage of more than 3GB of RAM, but not all peripherals are compatible with 64-bit Windows.

Only certain tasks benefit from so much memory, such as editing large video, photo and music files.

Most games run fine under 64-bit Vista, and the Serpens has two GeForce 9600 GT graphics cards configured in SLI mode. They performed very well in our demanding 3D graphics tests, managing scores comparable to those achieved by a single GeForce 8800 GT card. Unfortunately, the two cards aren't particularly quiet.

There are nine USB2 ports in total, which compensates for the lack of accessible internal expansion slots. The twin graphics cards block access to the PCI slots,



which could be inconvenient if you want to add a dedicated sound card or TV tuner. There's no shortage of drive bays for adding more hard disks or optical drives, though.

Cube247 bundles the same peripherals as the Sigma with the Serpens. The Creative T6100 5.1 surround-sound speakers have plenty of bass, which is good for games and movies, but music sounded muddy. Although the 22in widescreen monitor has an HDMI input instead of a DVI interface, you won't need an HDMI-to-DVI adaptor for a digital connection as the Serpens has two HDMI ports.

The Serpens is a fast gaming PC available for a great price, but check your existing peripherals for compatibility before buying.

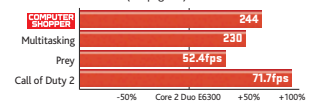
Alan Lu

SUMMARY

- ✓ Great 3D performance
- ✗ Noisy
- ✗ Blocked expansion slots

DESKTOP PC 2.4GHz Intel Core 2 Quad Q6600, 4GB RAM, 500GB hard disk, 2x 512MB 9600 GT, DVD+/-RW +/-DL, DVD-ROM, 22in widescreen LCD, Windows Vista Home Premium 64-bit, one-year collect-and-return warranty. Power consumption 9W standby, 152W idle, 190W active
PART CODE Serpens ST6
DETAILS www.cube247.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 66)



BYTE SIZE

RATOC CFU2 USB1.1 CF Card Adapter

★★★★

£100 inc VAT
From www.expansys.com

Adding a USB port to your Windows Mobile PDA might not be top of your list of priorities, but with the CFU2, you can. All your PDA needs is a Type II CF slot and Pocket PC 2003 or Windows Mobile 5.

Ratoc includes HID and mass storage drivers so you can connect a wide variety of devices to the USB port.

100mA is available from the port, so most low-power devices will work without an AC adaptor. Considering the price, it's a shame that the CFU2 doesn't support USB2 transfer speeds, but if you need a USB port for your PDA, this is your only option.

Jim Martin

DETAILS www.ratocsystems.com

GELASKIN The Great Wave 13in

★★★★★

£19 inc VAT
From www.firebox.com

Many laptops have glossy lids that look stylish but scratch easily. GelaSkin's range of adhesive vinyl skins stick on to your laptop's lid to protect it from scrapes. They can be removed without leaving any sticky residue behind and come in a range of sizes to fit 12in, 13in, 15in and 17in laptops.

The skins come in a range of eye-catching designs that can liven up an otherwise dull-looking laptop. This example fits 13in widescreen laptops and its appearance is a reproduction of The Great Wave off Kanagawa, by the Japanese artist Hokusai.

GelaSkin's protective covers look great and protect your laptop lid from scratching, but they're a little expensive.

Alan Lu

DETAILS www.gelaskins.com



CHOOSING A... PC System

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

PROCESSOR Intel Pentium Dual Core E2140

MEMORY 1GB

HARD DISK 250GB

STORAGE 18X DVD writer

SOUND Integrated

SPEAKERS Stereo

GRAPHICS Integrated

MONITOR 19in widescreen LCD

EXTRAS memory card reader

CONNECTORS 4x USB2, network

SOFTWARE Windows Vista Home Premium

BASICS Keyboard, mouse

Recommended minimum in grey

1 The minimum specification of PC we recommend, shown in grey above, is a good starting point when working out your ideal system. This PC would cost around £400 and is perfectly capable of running everyday office, multimedia or education software, as well as doing anything on the internet. But it's an unexciting PC. It will be able to play DVD movies, but they won't sound too impressive and modern games are a no-no.

2 The size and shape of a PC is more important than it used to be. A mini PC costs a bit more and it's less upgradable, but it will take up less desk space and look much more attractive. If you're choosing a media centre PC, make sure you get one that fits in with any other electronic equipment in your living room and that it's quiet.

3 If you are interested in games, upgrade to a decent graphics card. Budget cards based on the Radeon HD 3850 graphics processor will cope with this year's games, but to play next year's just as smoothly (and enjoy gorgeous graphics today) it's worth upgrading to a more powerful card such as an Nvidia GeForce 8800GT.

Look for an SLI or CrossFire system if you want to use two graphics cards to get the best graphics performance. Even if you don't want SLI or CrossFire now, it may be worth getting a system that's capable of being upgraded later.

4 The processor above is powerful and it's dual core, so it will handle intensive tasks. If you're going to be doing a lot of video editing, you should consider upgrading to an even more powerful processor. Intel's Core 2 Duo range is our current top choice; as well as being more powerful, it needs less cooling so your PC should be quieter.

5 If you're not interested in games, you can definitely live with integrated or cheap graphics, but there are plenty more reasons to upgrade the memory, hard disk or processor. If you'll be using your PC for serious desktop publishing, music or photo-editing tasks, you need the same kind of processor, memory and disk space as for games. For video editing consider getting two hard disks, perhaps in a RAID array.

6 A quality sound system will enhance all manner of

PC activities. To hear the surround soundtrack of a DVD at its best, you'll need a quality 5.1 speaker system. Games can also use such a system to throw sound effects around you.

If you're not interested in games or DVDs (or you don't want to trail wires all around the room), go for a quality stereo pair with a subwoofer to boost the bass instead.

If you want to listen to music or want better-quality sound, you'll need to invest in a dedicated sound card. As well as providing enhanced sound, such as Environmental Audio eXtension (EAX), which tweaks the acoustics to make sound appear to be playing in different environments, you'll get higher-quality outputs and more inputs.

7 All but the cheapest PCs now come with widescreen monitors. As well as being ideally suited for watching movies, they feel more natural for working on panoramic photos or expansive spreadsheets.

Non-widescreen 17in LCDs are inexpensive, but not very exciting and quite small. A 19in widescreen LCD is now standard and has a resolution of 1,440x900 pixels. Larger 20in and 22in LCDs are available from around £170 and have a higher resolution of 1,680x1,050. This makes them better for those who want to work with complex applications.

Decide if you want a glossy display or not. Glossy displays improve contrast and make images look brighter, but they reflect overhead lights and sunlight easily, which can be annoying.

8 The standard set of connectors can be improved with extra USB2 ports, to which most run-of-the-mill PC gadgets attach, and a FireWire port for fancy gadgets including most digital video (DV) cameras. Look for a memory card reader if you have a digital camera and make sure your camera's memory card is supported.

9 Windows Vista Home Premium is preinstalled on most new PCs. Any extra software bundled should be assessed critically. It may be that you'll never use it. But you may find a PC that includes software you'd otherwise have paid for, so you'll save lots of money by having it preloaded.

10 If you have money left over, consider a TV card. This lets you watch TV on your PC screen and record programmes to your hard disk, and some can capture analogue video from a camcorder.

